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Dropping Off Like Spies

From Shopping Malls to Museums, A Few Local Tricks of the Trade

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Long before Robert Pelton, the convicted Soviet spy, was receiving clandestine calls on a wall phone at the Pizza Castle in Falls Church, spies had been making their way across the Washington metropolitan area, dropping packages at trees in Poolesville, giving CIA officers the slip at a French restaurant, making contact with the KGB at Zayre's.



BY DAVID SUTER

It's part of "tradecraft"—the art of making the right connection at the right time.

"In general, the principles of selecting drop sites haven't changed in decades," says Roy Godson, Georgetown professor and director of the Washington office of the National Strategy Information Center. "Just the specific sites change."

Godson, an intelligence expert, has interviewed numerous current and former intelligence officers. "Almost all substantial intelligence organizations use one or another form of drop sites," Godson says, referring to the "live drop," where a spy meets someone, perhaps his case officer, and the "dead drop," where a spy leaves something to be picked up. "I just don't want to get into any specific sites."

But there are basic rules. "The KGB and the GRU [Soviet military intelligence] send people to school to learn how to do this," says Godson. "You don't just decide, 'Oh, let's go to that place.'"

For example:

- Pick a place easy to get into, easy to get out of and hard to be followed into.

"Favorite drop sites in the Washington area are shopping centers," Godson says. "It would range from shopping centers to the woods. Those fit the pattern of difficult to survey, lots of entrances and exits,

lots of people passing through."

- Pick a place where you belong. In other words, if you're not a punk rocker, don't make a drop at the 9:30 club.

"It's a matter of the individuals you're dealing with," says Samuel Halpern, a retired CIA officer. "Are you going to find them in the library or museum, the department store or supermarket? Where is it more likely for someone to see them?"

"If the Soviet case worker is meeting an American, where is the FBI likely to drop its surveillance? That's why it's so much more convenient to use drop sites—preferably dead. Then if something goes wrong, only one party gets caught . . . The idea is not to be conspicuous. You don't want to stand out like a sore thumb."

- Don't leave a trail of bread crumbs.

"It's frequent to use the public telephones and use them from one phone to another," says John K. Greaney, executive director of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers. "The reason is that it's very difficult to monitor all phones. If you get a warrant, it's usually limited to a specific phone for a specific person."

- Stay away from heavily secured areas.

"With greater surveillance around public buildings, you're not going to go to an airport or a railroad station or even a museum these days," says Halpern. It's not that guards are actively looking for you. It's just that they might remember you.

"Try going into even a lovely-looking museum like the Air and Space Museum these days," says Halpern. "The entrances are narrowed down to one entrance and one exit . . . You don't want to be narrowed down to one entrance where a security guard is looking at people and packages and briefcases and could later remember your face when he's looking through photographs and identify you."

- Don't be seen in the same place twice.

"Any popular restaurant could be a live drop site, but you wouldn't want to use the same one again and again," Godson says. "You're going to bring surveillance down on you. People are going to see you keep going to the

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same shopping center again and again."

Soviet Embassy officials may travel unrestricted only within a 25-mile radius of Washington. So that's one consideration if an American is spying for them.

No place is so pregnant with possibilities for drop sites as wooded areas: "It's very difficult to follow someone going into the woods," says Godson, who has even seen such spy tools as hollowed-out rocks and empty soft-drink cans with false bottoms: "They make them in the KGB labs—for secreting messages, packages or money."

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Confessed spy John Walker was typical.

On the evening of May 19, 1985, he drove to rural Poolesville in Montgomery County, stopping and getting out of his van many times to shake a potential tail. But FBI agents, trained in spotting dead drops, combed Walker's path until they found a tree on Partnership Road that they deduced was a reference point.

Thirty feet away, at a telephone pole with a "no hunting" sign on it, was a crumpled grocery bag—inside was "trash" on top of secret Navy documents wrapped in plastic.

"In every way, it looked like a Soviet drop site," FBI counterintelligence agent Bruce Brahe II testified during the espionage trial of Walker's brother Arthur. John Walker has said that from 1968 to May 1985 he made about 30 drops at various places in suburban Washington.

Though John Walker had most of his face-to-face meetings with Soviet contacts in Austria, he once met a Soviet contact in a Zayre department store in Northern Virginia. Walker carried a copy of Time magazine to identify himself.

More spies who got caught before they came in from the cold:

Former CIA officer David Barnett, who pleaded guilty in 1980 to selling secrets to the Soviets, was given a prearranged dead drop site by his Soviet contact—near Lock 11 on the

G&O Canal—and the numbers of two telephones outside a gas station in Annandale.

Barnett, who lived in Bethesda, used neither. Instead he called his contact on the last Saturday of each month from a public phone in the Bethesda Medical Building.

David Truong, one-time antiwar activist who was convicted of spying for Communist Vietnam along with former USIA officer Ronald L. Humphrey, was said in his indictment to have turned over stolen U.S. documents at such meeting places as the Landmark Shopping Center in Alexandria.

Waldo H. Dubberstein, a former Pentagon intelligence analyst indicted in 1983 on charges of selling U.S. military secrets to Libya through ex-CIA officer Edwin P. Wilson, allegedly received his payments at meetings in the Washington Hilton and the Key Bridge Marriott. (Dubberstein was found dead, an apparent suicide victim, in his apartment building the day after he was indicted.)

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To be sure, nothing is certain in the world of tradecraft.

Soviet defector Vitaly Yurchenko was eating dinner with his CIA security officer in the Georgetown restaurant Au Pied de Cochon in 1985 when Yurchenko said, "If I'm not back in 15 minutes, don't blame yourself." Yurchenko walked out, making his way to the Soviet compound near Calvert Street and Wisconsin Avenue—where he redefected. Afterward the restaurant put a little brass plaque over the booth where he sat. It reads, "Yurchenko's Last Supper, Saturday, November 2, 1985."

And some spies did not take elaborate precautions:

Edwin G. Moore II, a former CIA officer convicted in 1977 of attempting to sell documents to the Soviets, left a package of documents, a demand for money and an offer of more documents outside a Soviet residence here. A Soviet employe found the package and, thinking it was a bomb, called the police.